UNITED
NATIONS

A

General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/52/560
3 November 1997

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Fifty-second session
Agenda item 98 (d)

ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION

International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

In response to the request of the General Assembly in its resolution 51/185 of 16 December 1996, the present report contains information on the final phase of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (1998-1999). The report provides an overview of the status of implementation of Decade activities, an elaboration of the action plan for the period 1998-1999 as well as options for disaster reduction in the twenty-first century. The report addresses the issue of the preparatory phase for the final event of the Decade and also attempts to provide a forward-looking overview on the status of the synergies with other major strategic concerns of the United Nations system. A review of regional and global activities of the IDNDR is provided in the report, as well as a summary of activities of organizations of the United Nations system. Financial support from Governments and relevant United Nations organizations for the IDNDR secretariat's activities in the next two years was also identified as crucial to the success of the final phase of the Decade. The report concludes that Member States must agree on the form of the final event for the Decade and cites in this respect the proposal by the Scientific and Technical Committee of IDNDR to devote the high-level segment of the summer session of the Economic and Social Council in 1999 to the issue of disaster reduction and future institutional arrangements for the twenty-first century.

97-29960 (E) 101197

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. In 1997, the issue of disaster reduction continued to gain in importance and recognition. Numerous large-scale disasters have demonstrated the seriousness of the threat posed by natural hazards to vulnerable populations and the need for prevention and mitigation strategies. Disasters have occurred in industrialized and developing countries alike, with particularly harsh consequences for communities in least developed countries, land-locked countries and small island developing States. Disasters have a serious impact on the social and economic fabrics of countries and local communities. Disaster reduction is, therefore, recognized as an essential component of sustainable development strategies - one which protects human life and property as well as basic infrastructure and public services.

2. With barely two years remaining before the end of the Decade's programme, the secretariat for the Decade (IDNDR) depends on functional continuity, institutional visibility, policy recognition at the highest level and an active involvement of all in the International Framework of Action for the Decade (see Assembly resolution 44/236, annex). The Decade is now entering its process of evaluation of its overall achievements and developing of a comprehensive disaster reduction strategy for the twenty-first century.

3. This report is presented pursuant to Assembly resolution 51/185 of 16 December 1996, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to present proposals regarding the format, substance and timing of the closing event for the Decade and a programme of work for the biennium.

II. STATUS OF IMPLEMENTATION

A. Strategic synergies

4. In resolution 51/185, the Assembly underlined the need for the United Nations system to ensure the integration of the Yokohama Strategy and the Plan of Action (A/CONF.172/9, chap. I, resolution 1, annex I) into the coordinated approach taken to the follow-up to all recent United Nations conferences and summit meetings and the implementation of their respective plans of action. Consequently, the IDNDR secretariat has succeeded in establishing synergies with several global mainstream strategies of the United Nations system in both social and economic fields, such as the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, the World Food Summit, the Declaration on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the United Nations (Assembly resolution 50/6) and the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States. Concerning the latter, it should be noted that the IDNDR secretariat serves as Task Manager for the issue of natural and environmental disasters, and, together with the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), coordinated the preparation of the respective report of the Secretary-General (E/CN.17/1996/20/Add.1). The IDNDR secretariat is also cooperating closely with the Office of Outer Space Affairs in the preparation of the segment on disaster prevention warning and mitigation for the UNISPACE III Conference, to be held in Vienna 1999.

5. It should be noted that the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) considered IDNDR issues at its second regular session of 1997. ACC emphasized the importance of inter-agency collaboration in the follow-up to the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction and in the implementation of the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action. It called upon organizations of the United Nations system to contribute to the preparatory process for the closing event of the Decade and to give priority attention to the activities of the Decade beyond the year 2000.

6. The IDNDR secretariat actively participates in the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development with regard to the "Coordination of the geoscience programme of the United Nations system", as initiated by WMO in cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and other partners; it is also active in the ACC subcommittees on freshwater resources and on oceans and coastal areas, where it is responsible for producing a report on all achievements made and actions taken and to be taken by all agencies in the field of disaster prevention, in particular, the integration of the preventive aspect into land and water management.

B. Regional strategies

7. Within the implementation of IDNDR and, specifically, since the 1994 World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction, geographical regions and subregions have continuously gained in importance as centres of reference for the generation and sharing of knowledge and know-how in disaster reduction. Regional frameworks are highly conducive to enlarged community-based vulnerability assessment and risk reduction. Consequently, such strategies form one of the cornerstones for a successful conclusion of the Decade and its projection into the twenty-first century. Examples of regional strategies are the following:

(a) Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific island countries have adopted an IDNDR regional strategy for disaster reduction. The sixth South Pacific regional IDNDR disaster management meeting, held at Brisbane, Australia, from 9 to 12 September 1997, adopted a precise regional action plan for the Decade's consolidation phase as well as a strategic plan for the continuation of disaster reduction activities in the twenty-first century. The seventh South Pacific IDNDR meeting will be held in July 1998;

(b) With regard to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the newly independent States, a close collaborative relationship has been established between the IDNDR International Framework for Action and the Inter-State Council for Disaster Relief and Coordination of the CIS. The Council's last two meetings in Chisinau, Republic of Moldova, 20 to 21 May 1997, and Yerevan, Armenia, 23 to 24 September 1997, embarked on a concerted regional approach to disaster prevention, preparedness, mitigation and response within the Decade's concluding phase. The Moldova Declaration reaffirmed the commitment of the countries of the former Soviet Union to disaster reduction. The IDNDR secretariat is also actively participating in the Magdeburg Process on Cooperation of the Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern European Countries for the Protection against Natural and Other Disasters. The Government of Armenia

will host a regional IDNDR closing event in September 1998, in conjunction with the fifth Conference of the Magdeburg Process, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Spitak earthquake;

(c) The high-level segment of the 1995 substantive session of the Economic and Social Council was devoted to the question of the development of Africa, including the implementation of the United Nations New Agenda for the Development of Africa (see A/50/3, chap. II). The Council recognized the paramount interest of countries in Africa in effective natural disaster reduction, to be considered and achieved within the implementation of IDNDR itself, as well as within other major United Nations strategies in the region. The Organization of African Unity and the Economic Commission for Africa are active partners within the IDNDR framework;

(d) Countries of the Mediterranean basin agreed on guidelines for the development of a "Mediterranean strategy for disaster prevention and vulnerability reduction", as a result of an international workshop organized by the IDNDR secretariat and held in Rome from 26 to 28 September 1996, with the financial support of the Government of Italy and the organizational coordination of the Italian National Committee for IDNDR. Several other regional activities and meetings took place in 1996 and 1997 under the umbrella of the IDNDR, in particular, to explore cooperation and synergy in several specific fields, such as the use of satellite technology for disaster reduction, vulnerability assessment and risk management in urban areas, and water-related hazards;

(e) In Latin America and the Caribbean, successful regional cooperation has been established in particular with the Organization of American States, the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) and other regional constituencies, for a "hemispheric approach" to disaster reduction. In response to the call by the Hemispheric Congress on Disaster Reduction and Sustainable Development (Caracas, 1997), an inter-American dialogue for disaster reduction is being established, with support from international, regional, and national entities, both in the public and private sectors, to encourage the discussion of initiatives to meet the goals of the Decade. Several other processes have led to the progressive consolidation of a regional cooperation capacity in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as to the organization of numerous international meetings also in the framework of the final phase of the Decade. A regional meeting is to take place in Panama in October 1997, under the auspices of the Association of Caribbean States, to discuss the guidelines for the elaboration of a regional common position on disaster reduction. Finally, in 1997, 20 countries from Latin America, together with Spain and Portugal, represented by their heads of State, created the "Ibero-American Association of Governmental Civil Protection Organisms" under the overall framework of IDNDR;

(f) Another regional achievement is the establishment of the Regional Documentation Centre for disaster reduction in Latin America and the Caribbean, whose main purpose is to facilitate the access to existing and future technical and scientific information about the prevention, mitigation and response to disasters to improve the preventive culture and response capacity of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Members of the Centre are the IDNDR secretariat, PAHO, the regional office of Médecins sans Frontières, Costa Rica's National Emergency Commission, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red

Crescent Societies, and the Central American National Disaster Prevention Center;

(g) The Government of the United States adopted a comprehensive disaster reduction strategy, elaborated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, taking into account the global objectives of the Decade. Concerning the role of civil society in disaster reduction, further progress has to be noted on the building of cooperative links between the public and the private sector. In particular, a Public-Private Partnership initiative (PPP-2000) was launched in the United States in 1997. Along the same principles, the Canadian National Committee for IDNDR, together with the disaster reduction community in Canada, started a project on "Risk and Societies" with a view to identifying local community needs for an overall disaster reduction strategy;

(h) The Commission of the European Union and the Council of Europe have been actively engaged in disaster reduction. The initiatives launched in the past two years have covered both the vulnerability of European countries to natural disasters and the integration of natural disaster reduction into scientific, environmental, developmental and humanitarian cooperation programmes with third countries. The efficient work of the IDNDR national committees of France, Germany and the United Kingdom must be commended, especially in relation to the planning and organization of relevant central events of the final phase of the Decade, such as the conference on early warning systems with regard to natural and similar disasters scheduled to take place at Potsdam, Germany, in 1998;

(i) In Asia, several regional activities and meetings have taken place in the framework of the Decade. The greater attention being shown to disaster reduction in 1997 has been due in part to the uncontrollable fires that have plagued Indonesia. China, India, Nepal and many other countries have engaged in significant national and regional disaster reduction initiatives. Japan announced its intention to establish an Asian disaster reduction centre in the near future. From a more general point of view, the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre in Bangkok has continued to advocate the principles of the Decade and, as a key partner in the region, has reconfirmed its full commitment to the implementation of the final phase of the Decade.

C. Global activities

1. World disaster reduction campaigns

8. World disaster reduction campaigns are organized each year by the IDNDR secretariat in order to promote worldwide awareness on specific issues and themes related to disaster reduction. The international media attention for the campaigns culminates on International Disaster Reduction Day, established in accordance with General Assembly resolution 44/236 and observed each year on the second Wednesday of October. The campaigns are conceived as ongoing activities throughout the year to spread awareness for disaster reduction to traditional and new target audiences.

9. The 1996 promotion campaign was built on the theme of "Cities at risk". It was chosen to complement important conferences in 1996, such as the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) and the Second International Conference on Local Authorities Confronting Disasters and Emergencies. The IDNDR secretariat produced guidelines on activities for the campaign in the shape of five leaflets (guidelines for organizers, poster contest, conferences, activities for children, facts and figures), which national committees and many other partner organizations and individuals used to observe the 1996 World Disaster Reduction Campaign. An innovative instrument for the Campaign was the establishment of an Internet (virtual) conference on "Cities at Risk". As one of the first conferences on the Internet in the United Nations system, the project brought together around 450 participants from 50 countries. The conference proved to be a successful substantive and networking exercise in disaster reduction awareness building.

10. In 1997, the International Day for Natural Disaster Reduction (8 October) was commemorated in a very large number of countries with events ranging from national awareness campaigns over several months to policy round tables and conferences bringing together water specialists and disaster mitigation experts. As a major specific activity, the IDNDR secretariat organized, in collaboration with a wide range of partners, its second Internet (virtual) conference on "Floods, drought: issues for the twenty-first century". Building on the success of the first IDNDR Internet conference in 1996, the 1997 Internet conference on water-related disasters attracted 700 participants from around 60 countries in order to discuss issues related to floods and drought. The 1997 World Disaster Reduction Campaign theme is "Water: too much ... too little ... leading cause of natural disasters".

11. The theme for the 1998 Campaign, which will culminate with the observance of the International Day for Natural Disaster Reduction (14 October), is "Disaster prevention and the media". The intention is to enlist the participation of the media at the international, regional and local levels in the dissemination of messages on the need for a "culture of prevention".

2. Other activities

12. With the support of the Government of Japan, the IDNDR secretariat is conducting the project "Risk assessment tools for diagnosis of urban areas against seismic disasters" (RADIUS), which aims at promoting worldwide activities for the reduction of earthquake disasters in urban areas, particularly in developing countries and is designed to develop practical tools for seismic risk assessment in urban areas, based on the analysis of case studies. The IDNDR secretariat will offer financial and technical assistance for the elaboration of such case studies. The project is based on the active involvement of cities and communities in the exchange of knowledge and expertise. The development of such "robust city systems" was one recommendation of the Habitat II Conference. The IDNDR secretariat is finalizing the selection of 10 case study cities in developing countries where earthquake damage scenarios will be developed. Other cities in developed countries that have already carried out a seismic risk assessment or will be in the process of doing so will be associated to the project. The associate cities will obtain useful

information from other cities and compare their respective degree of preparedness while contributing their own know-how, through the network of RADIUS.

13. The IDNDR secretariat successfully completed its current work programme for early warning, with regard to natural disasters, in response to Assembly resolution 50/117 B. Six international expert groups were convened to examine scientific knowledge and public practices that could contribute to more accurate and timely short-term forecasting and warning applications for natural and similar disasters. The resulting reports will be issued as IDNDR information papers, and their conclusions are summarized in the Secretary-General's report on improved effectiveness of early warning systems (A/52/561).

14. The IDNDR secretariat has developed a global and comprehensive project proposal "Disaster reduction for sustainable development", which aims at reducing the risk from natural disasters by providing advice on and support for the integration of disaster reduction into sustainable development strategies and development planning. The project is designed so as to be adaptable to any regional, subregional, national or local-level risk scenario. It builds on pilot activities for lessons learned and risk reduction in selected areas. So far, sub-proposals have been developed for activities in Albania, the Baltic States, countries in Central Europe affected by recent river floods, and in selected small island developing States (with particular emphasis on local capacity-building). The IDNDR secretariat is actively involved in activities towards reducing the vulnerability of small island States to natural disasters.

15. During the reporting period, the IDNDR secretariat has placed great emphasis on developing public/private partnerships for disaster reduction and preventive risk management. The private sector has engaged, in cooperation with the IDNDR secretariat, in a variety of activities reaching from the Leadership Coalition for Global Business Protection, initiated by IBM, to individual partnerships, i.e. with service and hardware providers in the space industry. In October 1997, IDNDR sponsored the International Disaster and Emergency Response Exhibition and Conference (IDER'97) in The Hague, the Netherlands, which was organized by Andrich International Ltd. The Conference highlighted the need for active partnership between the public and private sectors in developing comprehensive strategies for disaster prevention, preparedness and mitigation.

16. Non-governmental organizations will play an increasingly important role in the continuation of disaster reduction activities in the twenty-first century. Within the context of national IDNDR committees or similar approaches, NGOs have particular strengths in the fields of local community participation, the formulation of social development interests and integrated approaches towards disaster reduction. The IDNDR secretariat recently participated in the annual meeting of the Global Forum of NGOs for Disaster Reduction, held in Phoenix, Arizona, United States, in September 1997. The Global Forum has been established as a specific NGO follow-up to the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction.

17. In continuation of its primary motivation for the Decade, the scientific and technical community has remained active in promoting practical applications

of scientific knowledge and the dissemination of experience by means of their numerous professional organizations. The International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) and the World Federation of Engineering Unions continue to actively participate in IDNDR activities. ICSU is currently pursuing opportunities through its IDNDR Subcommittee with interested unions to ensure a continued professional focus on disaster reduction into the next century. The International Association of Seismology and Physics and the Earth's Interior (IASPEI) and the International Association of Volcanology and Chemistry of the Earth's Interior (IAVCEI) are jointly sponsoring a major conference to be held in 1998 in Santiago, Chile on modern preparation and response systems for earthquake, tsunami and volcanic hazards, an international meeting of governmental, academic and private institutions that will serve a major function in consolidating the lessons learned and applied in geophysics during the course of the Decade.

18. In order to strengthen concerted action for natural disaster reduction, the IDNDR secretariat, UNESCO, the Natural Hazard Mitigation Group (CERG) and the University of Geneva, Switzerland, have initiated the project "Development of institutional networks for disaster reduction". The purpose of the Web site project is to promote exchange of information, collaboration, and establishment of mechanisms for supporting the appropriate research, training, and application of disaster reduction at local levels. The intention is to provide the Internet community with an inventory of organizations active in the field of disaster preparedness, prevention and mitigation and to promote exchange of information, collaboration, and the establishment of mechanisms for supporting the appropriate research, training and application of disaster reduction at the local and regional levels.

III. FINAL PHASE OF THE DECADE

19. In its resolution 51/185, the Assembly recognized the paramount importance of a well-structured and coherent process towards the conclusion of the Decade, and requested proposals concerning the shape and form of natural disaster reduction activities in the twenty-first century and regarding the format, substance and timing of a closing event for the Decade with a view to enabling a forceful launching of the preparatory process as early as possible in 1998. In reference to these requests, the following paragraphs provide an overview of the proposed IDNDR action plan until the end of 1999, which was endorsed by the Scientific and Technical Committee for IDNDR at its ninth session, held in Geneva from 13 to 17 October 1997. As requested by the Assembly, future institutional options for disaster reduction activities after the end of the Decade are also presented below.

A. Action plan 1998-1999

20. The proposed IDNDR action plan 1998-1999 is a strategic framework for the implementation of the concluding phase of the Decade. It focuses on the implementation of crucial activities that exemplify the Decade's objective to reduce through concerted international action, especially in developing countries, the loss of life, property damage, and social and economic disruption

caused by natural and similar disasters that have an adverse impact upon the environment.

21. The plan is based upon the original aims of the Decade, as further elaborated at the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction, including the importance of human well-being in disaster reduction, the economic rationale for policy motivation to protect social resources and economic assets, and the essential value of community participation. Additional international initiatives related to hazard awareness and risk management practices for disaster reduction, such as forms of public-private partnership collaboration, have also influenced the preparation of the action plan.

22. The first objective of the plan is the consolidation of the Decade's achievements. In this respect, the original programming targets are considered the basis for assessing the achievements of the Decade. According to these targets, by the year 2000 all countries should have in place, as part of their national plans to achieve sustainable development, (a) comprehensive national assessments of risks from natural hazards integrated into development plans, (b) mitigation plans of practical measures for application at national and local levels to address long-term disaster prevention, preparedness and community awareness, and (c) ready access to global, regional, national and local warning systems.

23. The second objective of the action plan is to provide a platform for the future and to permit a wide ranging discussion on options for functional responsibilities and institutional mechanisms for continued disaster reduction activities in the twenty-first century.

24. The action plan is organized along the following primary themes for action:

(a) Hazard, vulnerability and risk assessment, including the translation of scientific knowledge of hazards to practical understanding and use, as well as a multi-disciplinary assessment of vulnerability;

(b) Disaster prevention and sustainable development in relation to the human habitat and productive environment, economic aspects, social aspects, environmental and land use aspects, and local practices dedicated to realizing global commitments towards economic growth, sustainable development, environmental protection and social and gender equity;

(c) Early warning issues, including greater international coordination and operational coherence, improved effectiveness of early warning and related response capabilities, local access and utilization capacities, and effective, assured and accessible telecommunications;

(d) Political and public policy commitment, including advocacy, information dissemination and partnership activities, statutory and legislative bases, evidence of the acceptance of reduction practices, international donor encouragement for protection and reduction, commitment of national policy and decision makers, engagement of municipal authorities and implementing agencies, as well as local and community measures for disaster reduction;

(e) Shared knowledge and technology transfer, including the application of research, the practical demonstrations of experience, the utilization of bottom-up implementation practices, the application of indigenous knowledge, organized information and communication, as well as developed organizational networks, and partnership collaboration.

25. The action plan will be implemented at three different levels:

(a) At the national level, selected activities will be undertaken by national committees for the Decade and relevant national authorities with local involvement, including public information and education programmes. The aim is to document accomplishments during the Decade through country reports, to publicize lessons learned and benefits of disaster reduction, to identify gaps in activities and to propose recommendations for future action;

(b) At the regional level, activities will focus on shared knowledge and the transfer of technologies for disaster reduction among countries of the same region and between regions themselves, based on the potential for synergy, cooperation and burden sharing;

(c) At the international level, the first purpose is to document global accomplishments in disaster reduction since 1990. In this respect, the action plan calls for the establishment of a comprehensive IDNDR secretariat Web site of sources, institutions and sites for disaster reduction information on the Internet.

26. The action plan also forecasts the production of an independent assessment by the Scientific and Technical Committee of the Decade's achievements in the form of a final report of the Committee to the Secretary-General in 1999.

27. One important aspect of the action plan relates to the anticipation of the kind of disasters likely to prevail in the twenty-first century. With the development of the global economy and its inexorable demands on both the human and the natural environment, new and more complicated hazards must be anticipated. They will combine the forces of nature with the ill-considered, or uncontrolled, behaviour of humankind, which can easily increase the vulnerability of communities and threaten the assets on which they must depend. The recent and long-term transboundary, social, economic and public health consequences of the fires in south-east Asia are a case in point. The widespread extent and severity of floods, as experienced this year in North America, Asia and Latin America, or the drought conditions anticipated in association with the recurrent El Niño phenomenon in parts of Africa, Australia and Asia cannot be separated from extensive economic and social ramifications affecting millions of people. The informed assessment of these contemporary hazards, effective risk management, and the prevention of future disasters must begin at the present time and be fully incorporated into the ongoing commitments of economic growth and developmental planning - at the international, regional, and national levels of responsibility.

28. The full text of the action plan is available from the secretariat of the IDNDR in the Department for Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat. The plan also contains an overview of a series of events that are

under way or that have been committed to in relation to the primary themes or regional assessments.

B. Recommendations from Decade Framework partners

29. National committees for the Decade remain an indispensable component for its successful implementation. Through their multisectoral and interdisciplinary function they provide key inputs into regional strategy building and, consequently, into the overall evaluation of the Decade's achievements. Many national committees have already embarked on developing their own positions and initiatives as to how disaster reduction could be projected in the twenty-first century; some committees have formulated comprehensive action plans for the remaining period of the Decade. The IDNDR secretariat is committed to strengthening its communication with national IDNDR committees in order to fully support their efforts and activities.

30. The informal core and contact groups of Permanent Missions in Geneva have continued to provide an excellent forum for consultations with Member States on all matters concerning the Decade. Two formal meetings were held in Geneva, in February and March 1997, with the participation of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs. The informal contact group met in Geneva, in June 1997, and provided the initial forum for consultations on the Decade's closing event, the preparatory process and the envisaged priority activities within IDNDR for the remaining two years. The discussions within the informal core and contact groups were complemented by a number of bilateral discussions both in Geneva and in Member State capitals.

31. The Inter-Agency Steering Committee is the central forum for discussion of disaster reduction policies, strategic applications and programmes of action among the United Nations partners within the International Framework of Action. Its Working Group met in Geneva in May 1997. The discussions enabled the IDNDR secretariat to make swift progress in developing its action plan for 1998 and 1999 and to define major parameters for the concluding phase, including the closing event, the preparatory process and the projection of disaster reduction into the twenty-first century.

32. The main views as expressed in the Working Group meeting and in the follow-up contributions are summarized as follows:

(a) The agencies of the United Nations system identified certain areas that require further emphasis within the Framework of the Decade. The agencies stated that some national committees needed to be revitalized so that they could play a more active role in the implementation of the Decade's programmes, and greater efforts were needed towards the integration of disaster prevention into national development programmes;

(b) Several of the recommendations addressed the fact that, with the probable increase in the impact of natural disasters in the next century, more powerful technologies must be used to improve the efficiency of early warning systems and other facilities for disaster reduction. The international community also needs to standardize the multiple systems for early warning in

the case of natural and man-made disasters. The creation of a Web site for the IDNDR, which would display all the documentation and data collected during the decade for future reference and use, was also mentioned;

(c) The agencies also commented on possible future institutional arrangements for the creation of a disaster reduction mechanism after the conclusion of the Decade. They stressed the importance of a central international point of reference for all the actors involved in the implementation of their respective specific mandates. In the same spirit, and with regard to the final phase of the Decade, the agencies supported the organization of several regional and subregional events and the consolidation of the results from these events in the closing event of the Decade in 1999.

33. During the reporting period, the Scientific and Technical Committee for IDNDR held its eighth session in Paris, from 20 to 23 January 1997, and its ninth session in Geneva, from 13 to 17 October 1997. A separate report of those sessions is being produced for distribution to Member States. At both sessions, the Committee concentrated on the action plan for 1998-1999, on the closing event for the Decade and on the future of disaster reduction activities in the twenty-first century. The El Niño phenomenon was discussed at the ninth session. The Committee expressed the view that the IDNDR Framework should be involved, possibly in an increased fashion, in this important and potentially very serious natural hazard. At the conclusion of its ninth session, the Committee adopted a Declaration, which is reproduced as an annex to this report.

C. Preparatory process and closing event

34. In 1999, the United Nations Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction will come to an end. However, the function of disaster reduction will not cease. On the contrary, it will need further strengthening to become an important element of government policy and development planning. It is, therefore, important to conceive the closing event of the Decade not just as a review of disaster reduction activities in the 1990s but as a platform for the future so that it can project the ideas and fundamental concepts of disaster reduction into the twenty-first century. Furthermore, the concluding event of the Decade must demonstrate visibly and forcefully a shift from the simple awareness of unmitigated risk to a more focused assessment of risk management strategies.

35. For the reasons mentioned above, the Scientific and Technical Committee has recommended that the closing event of the Decade should include an important political component. This is best addressed, in the view of the Committee, by devoting the high-level segment of the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council in 1999 to disaster reduction and risk management. Alternatively, a special meeting of the General Assembly might be envisaged. Political consideration of the Decade by the Council could be complemented by the organization of a programme forum that would involve all the IDNDR Framework partners, which would include the Scientific and Technical Committee, national committees and other national constituencies, scientific and academic institutions, NGOs, regional entities and other relevant partners, as well as representation from the United Nations system at large.

36. The programme forum would, in concurrence with the discussion of the Council or the special meeting of the Assembly, provide the arena for a substantive review of disaster reduction achievements during the Decade, including their evaluation against the original targets. Such an evaluative and retrospective component of the Decade's conclusion could be structured in different ways, either by disciplines or sectors, or by thematic goals or strategic objectives. Additionally, comprehensive regional evaluations could be envisaged. Building on this evaluation of achievements, forward-looking proposals would be developed concerning the function of disaster reduction after the end of the Decade, including new goals and objectives and, possibly, a new programme of action, and new institutional arrangements.

37. Within the framework of the programme forum, due recognition would be given to scientific and technical progress in disaster reduction under the IDNDR umbrella. To this end and to elicit the views of the scientific community on the future scientific aspects of disaster reduction, the programme forum could contain a segment gathering participants from the relevant institutions and United Nations agencies. WMO might assume the role of coordinator of such a segment.

38. The establishment of a steering committee for the closing event is now under consideration. The steering committee would be set up jointly by the Chairman of the Scientific and Technical Committee and the Director of the IDNDR secretariat, in close consultation with all interested parties. It would be responsible for ensuring coherence in approach between the Council/Assembly component of the closing event and the programme forum. As already indicated in Assembly resolution 51/185, the IDNDR secretariat is the entity responsible for the preparatory process leading to the final events and for the organization of the latter.

39. Funding for the preparatory phase and for the closing event must be urgently sought. The preparatory phase will require staff and other expenditures, which are not available at the present time in the IDNDR secretariat.

IV. OPTIONS FOR FUTURE ARRANGEMENTS

40. The main institutional options for disaster reduction arrangements in the twenty-first century have to be based on an analysis of future disaster reduction functions.

A. Functional analysis of disaster reduction activities

41. Disaster reduction represents a key function for sustainable development, ensuring "safe development in a globalizing world", eradicating poverty, and strengthening civic society. Effective analysis of hazards, assessments of risk, and the reduction of vulnerability to disasters are key issues within efforts towards economic prosperity and social stability. These activities contribute to the protection of human lives, property and economic assets at the

local, national, regional and international levels. They also contribute to sound management of the environment and the protection of natural resources.

42. Within the United Nations system, disaster reduction, which is based on scientific knowledge and the availability of technology, is being recognized as forming an integral part of sustainable development strategies; it is also considered as an important component in the evolution of disaster management doctrines and applications. It forms a distinct link between the preventive and response elements of disaster management.

43. Disaster reduction therefore represents a cross-cutting issue within the coordinated approach towards the implementation of the results of all major recent United Nations summits and conferences in the social and economic fields. It is an important component with regard to raising the effectiveness of both development cooperation and the coordination of humanitarian assistance.

44. The main illustrative activities of disaster reduction strategies are (a) advocacy and awareness-raising of the need and the potential for disaster reduction, (b) promotion of hazard-related research and the dissemination of existing scientific resources and technology, (c) building effective partnerships among disaster-prone countries at the subregional, regional and international levels, (d) the integration of disaster reduction into national development planning, (e) strengthening the capacities of local communities to reduce, prepare for, and respond to disasters of any type, and (f) the participatory involvement of the private sector in order to ensure social and economic stability as well as business/market continuity through effective risk management.

B. Institutional options for the future

45. In line with the above functional analysis, and as requested by Assembly resolution 51/185, the following institutional options for future disaster reduction arrangements are presented:

(a) Advocacy and promotion of disaster reduction within the coordinated efforts of the international community towards achieving sustainable development, by means of the Commission on Sustainable Development and with the support of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, the United Nations resident coordinator system, and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (with regard to disaster reduction as part of macroeconomic policies in support of enhanced competitiveness of disaster-prone developing countries);

(b) Integration of disaster reduction into national development planning and programming as part of the United Nations coordinated approach towards technical cooperation and development at the country level. In this context the main responsibility lies with the United Nations Development Programme and its resident representatives, including the coordination mechanisms of the Joint Consultative Group on Policy and the country strategy note;

(c) Application of disaster reduction within the framework of international scientific cooperation and transfer of technology, to be executed under the auspices of and in close organizational association with a specialized agency, such as WMO or UNESCO;

(d) Definition of disaster reduction as a component of public/private sector partnerships at the local, national, subregional, regional and international levels. This would include support for sustained economic growth and sustainable development, support for the eradication of poverty, and for social stability and well-being. Responsibilities would, in this case, lie predominantly with the private sector itself and local administration;

(e) Continuation and strengthening of disaster reduction as an element of disaster management under the coordinating responsibility of the United Nations and its focal authority for disasters (Office of the Emergency Relief Coordinator), with application responsibilities allocated to specialized agencies and organizations of the United Nations system, as well as the NGO community active in this field;

(f) Emphasis on the multisectoral dimension of disaster reduction and the need for coordination of United Nations system initiatives under an ACC subcommittee type of arrangement. This would require strong inter-agency support and commitment.

V. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

46. The impact of natural disasters is on the rise. As the twenty-first century approaches, rapid urbanization, environmental degradation and increased industrial activities, in particular when concentrated in hazard-prone areas, make the risk of major disasters even higher. It is estimated that the number of major natural disasters in the past 10 years was four times as high as in the 1960s. The number of people affected by disasters has been growing by 6 per cent on average per year since 1960. Almost 3 million have perished in natural disasters in the past three decades, while tens of millions have been affected by them. The Munich Reinsurance Company estimates total economic losses from natural disasters to have reached US$ 240 billion for the biennium 1995-1996.

47. These statistics emphatically call for a vigorous global action against disasters. Society can no longer be satisfied with waiting for disasters to occur and then only engage in relief activities. Disaster reduction must become an essential element of sustainable development policies and economic planning. The escalating cost of responding to disasters and compensating victims for losses incurred is becoming too high for Governments and local authorities to handle. The only affordable solution is to invest in prevention and mitigation activities. The present tendency of relying exclusively on a response-oriented approach to disasters needs to be replaced by strategic planning in prevention. If it is illusory to believe that hazards can be stopped, the avoidance or mitigation of disasters is an attainable goal.

48. Today, society faces unprecedented risks that have been amplified by technological progress. To ensure the successful prevention of disasters, better knowledge and understanding of natural phenomena and their impact is required, reinforcing the importance of the interaction between science and the society. The role of the programmes of the Decade as a bridge between these two worlds is vital, and it is in this context that the goals and objectives of the Decade have become even more relevant.

49. It is imperative that all Governments accord to disaster reduction the importance it deserves. Support to the IDNDR secretariat's action programme for 1998-1999 is essential to ensure that a culture of prevention prevails, thereby reducing the loss of life and human suffering resulting from disasters.

ANNEX

Declaration of the Scientific and Technical Committee of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, 17 October 1997

(i) The Scientific and Technical Committee of the IDNDR reaffirmed at its ninth session, held in Geneva from 13 to 17 October 1997, the need for Governments all around the world to integrate disaster reduction and risk management as an essential element of their development planning and sustainable development policies.

(ii) The growing vulnerability of populations to natural threats and the increasingly heavy toll of disasters on human beings and their property require urgent attention from all. At least 3 million people have lost their lives in disasters during the last 30 years, with 6.5 million people affected by natural disasters and recorded economic losses amounting to more than US$ 240 billion in 1995-1996 alone.

(iii) Humanity cannot afford to wait for disasters to come and only then take action through response and rehabilitation. This is becoming a severe burden for most societies and their Governments, both in financial and social terms. Prevention and preparedness strategies, based on scientific and technological applications as well as on social equity, and including the full involvement of civil society, must be put in place to protect national assets and property and especially to reduce human suffering, the loss of life, and the disruption of livelihoods.

(iv) The Scientific and Technical Committee strongly believes that the issue of disaster reduction must be taken up at the highest level of international and intergovernmental deliberations and urges all Governments to consider discussion of such issues at the high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council, in Geneva in 1999 or, alternatively, at a special meeting of the General Assembly during that year. It is of paramount importance to ensure that there is a concerted and coordinated international approach to risk reduction strategies in the twenty-first century. There will otherwise be no international foundation for risk reduction strategies at the closing of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (1990-2000). A new approach to disaster reduction, on the basis of an evaluation of the Decade's achievements, must be collectively agreed to by the international community.

(v) The Committee stresses that, in addition to selecting the appropriate high-level forum for 1999, Governments should seriously consider providing the necessary support for the IDNDR action plan 1998-1999 and for a programme forum in Geneva centred around the main themes for disaster reduction strategies for the end of the Decade. It also urgently requests all relevant organizations of the United Nations system to provide specific human and financial support to the IDNDR and to its action plan so that the stated goals and objectives of the Decade can be effectively met.